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MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: NIE 11-14-66, "Capabilities of Soviet General Purpose Forces"

1. Attached is National Intelligence Estimate 11-14-66, "Capabilities of Soviet General Purpose Forces" (i.e., all Soviet forces except those for strategic attack and strategic defense, which are the subject of other estimates). In my judgment, the conclusions of this estimate can be summarized as follows:

a. Without lowering the top priority given to strategic attack and strategic defense forces, the Soviets are beginning to pay more attention to their general purpose forces. For years, the general purpose forces have been tailored for use in a general nuclear war, which of course has reduced their ability to wage conventional war. The Soviet leaders now recognize a need to be prepared for a wider range of contingencies. This change in attitude probably reflects their reaction to US emphasis on "flexible response," to current tensions in the Far East, and to anticipated improvements in their own nuclear deterrent.

b. There have not yet been any major changes in the Soviet general purpose forces. The ground, tactical air, and tactical missile forces remain disposed chiefly for operations against the Central Region of NATO, but some gradual improvements have quietly been made in the Soviet forces on the Sino-Soviet border. In recent years the Soviets have considerably improved their capabilities for war at sea, notably against carrier task forces, but they still have no effective counter to Polaris submarines.

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c. The number of men we are talking about in this paper is of the order of two million, or about two-thirds of all the men in the present day regular Soviet military establishment. Some 1.3 to 1.5 million of these are in the ground forces, which consist of some 140 divisions and such non-divisional supporting elements as artillery and missile brigades and engineer, signal, and transportation units. It is important to realize that some of these divisions (61) are almost fully manned and ready to go, and that another group (48) are 60-75 percent fully manned and could be filled out and made ready to go in a week or so.

d. For operations against the Central Region of NATO in the event of war, the Soviets rely not only on their own 26-division force in Eastern Europe, but also on 24 East German, Czech, and Polish divisions. The non-divisional supporting elements maintained with Soviet and East European forces in peacetime are considerably under strength, however. If the circumstances allowed, the Soviets would want to bring forward substantial reinforcements (about 30 divisions as well as supporting elements) before engaging NATO in the Central Region.

e. Despite the evident Soviet desire to improve the general purpose forces, the regime's ability to do so is limited by a variety of economic and political factors. Any improvement is likely to be gradual, without drastic changes in funding or manpower strength.

f. Over the longer term, we expect a gradual transition to a lesser number of larger divisions with better non-divisional support, providing forces better suited for conventional warfare than at present. Naval capabilities will also gradually improve, but Soviet capabilities to cope with Polaris are likely to remain extremely limited at least for the next few years. In normal course the Soviets will become better able to move troops over long distances by air and sea, but we perceive no urgent program to develop a capability to do so against military opposition.

2. This estimate on Soviet general purpose forces comes right after our estimate on Soviet long range attack forces and will be followed shortly by one setting forth our latest findings on Soviet strategic defense forces.

3. I commend the entire document to your attention, especially its more formal Conclusions.

Richard Helms  
Director

Identical memoranda sent to:

The Secretary of State  
The Secretary of Defense  
The Deputy Secretary of Defense  
The Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff  
Mr. Walt W. Rostow

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